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ABSTRACT

The House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor asked the General Accounting Office (GAO) to look at school testing as it exists, to estimate its extent and cost, and to assess how a new national test might affect those factors. GAO gathered information from a variety of sources, including a 1991 survey with replies from 48 states and 74% of local districts in its national sample. U.S. students in 1991 did not appear to have been over tested, with systemwide testing taking up about 7 hours per year for an average student, half in testing and half in related activity. The overall cost in 1991 was estimated at $516 million, an estimated $15 per student. A future national test, whether a single performance-based test, a multiple-choice test, or tests for a decentralized system of clusters of states, would range from about $160 million for the first option to about $330 million after development costs for the cluster option with a performance-based test. However, there was significant opposition among respondents to the concept of a national examination system. The GAO believes that if the Congress wishes to mandate a national examination system, efforts should be made to involve local teachers and administrators, as well as to ensure the technical quality of the test. Four sources are listed for further reading. (SLD)

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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

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Cost of a National Examination

A summary of "Student Testing: Current Extent and Expenditures, with Cost Estimates for a National Examination." Report of the United States General Accounting Office, GAO/PEMD 93-8

Recent proposals from the federal executive branch and private groups have drawn unprecedented attention to the idea of a national examination for elementary and secondary students. The House Committee on Education and Labor asked GAO to look at school testing as it exists today, describe its nature, estimate its extent and cost, and assess how a new, national test might affect those factors.

Background

Most of the debate on expanded national testing has centered on major issues of what to test, how to test, and how to use the results. Not much attention has been given to date to the question of how much and what kind of testing there is now. Yet the likely success of future testing may be related to the size, nature, and cost of current efforts about which there exist only wide-ranging, conflicting, and highly uncertain estimates. These range from 30 million to over 127 million standardized tests administered per year, at a cost of from $100 million to $915 million. The congressionally mandated National Council on Education Standards and Testing (NCEST) declined to provide a cost estimate in its report recommending a national testing system, and others' estimates have ranged from a few million dollars a year up to $3 billion.

GAO wanted to obtain valid national data on at least all systemwide tests; that is, those given to all students at any one grade level in a school district. This excludes tests that only selected students take, such as individual teachers' exams, special education diagnostic tests, or college admissions exams. In the fall of 1991, GAO surveyed testing officials in all the state education agencies and in a random sample of U.S. school districts. The survey included questions about each test administered and about the testing officials' views on the balance of costs and benefits in their current testing effort, on trends in the field, and on the idea of a national test. GAO received completed questionnaires from 74 percent of the local districts in the national sample and from 48 of the 50 states. The results are generalizable nationwide.

Results in Brief

In 1990-91, U.S. students do not seem to have been overtested. Systemwide testing took up about 7 hours per year for an average student (half in direct testing and half in related activity) and cost about $15 per student including the cost of the test and staff time.

The typical test was the familiar, commercially developed four-or five-subject multiple-choice exam. The less common performance-based tests--in which students write out some answers--cost more (an average of about $20 per student), but were considered by some testing officials to be an improvement and a preferable direction for further development. GAO estimates the overall cost of systemwide testing in 1990-91 at $516 million.

Three models are commonly discussed for future national testing, including (1) a single national multiple-choice test, (2) a single national performance-based test, and (3) a decentralized system of clusters of states, each cluster using different performance-based tests. GAO estimated that none of these would cost as much as the multi-billion-dollar estimates that some have put forth. The first option would be least expensive ($160 million per year). The third (clusters), the one advocated by NCEST, would likely cost about $330 million per year after about $100 million in start-up development costs, and the costs could be expected to decline over time. Any choice among the three options would involve trade-offs. For example, the least expensive multiple-choice test would be familiar and provide the most comparable data, but would be the most duplicative and might not be as valued by many state and local testing officials. Clusters of performance tests would cost more and would not necessarily be comparable, but may be better linked to local teaching and would be viewed more favorably by many testing officials.

Those officials responding to GAO's survey did not oppose more tests, but expressed concerns over the purpose, quality, and locus of control over the content and administration of further tests. They preferred tests of high technical quality that would be useful for diagnosing problems at the state or local level. However, many respondents expressed opposition to the general idea of a national test.

Principals Findings

The Current Extent and Nature of School Testing

Though the average student spent only 7 hours annually on systemwide testing, GAO found wide variation and totals as high as 30 hours a year. A majority of systemwide testing was state-mandated, with state education agencies developing most of these tests, usually in conjunction with test development contractors.

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Almost 60 percent of the tests used were commercially available, with achievement tests from three publishers accounting for 43 percent of all systemwide tests. Testing remained traditional in format, with 71 percent of all tests including only multiple-choice questions.

GAO's survey showed that new approaches to testing are finding limited acceptance. By 1990-91, performance-based tests (with the exception of fairly common tests asking for a writing sample) were in use in only seven states or in specialized applications such as readiness tests for very young students. However, these seven states, and several others that have developed high-quality multiple-choice tests, have developed fairly sophisticated testing programs and have gained an expertise in test development that could be useful to the development of a national examination system. Most of these states, moreover, employed local teachers and administrators in test development and scoring and reported that their involvement facilitated acceptance of the test and the alignment of the test to the subject matter that teachers actually teach.

The Current Cost of Testing

The $15 per-student average cost of testing included $4 in purchase costs and over $10 in state and local staff time, but costs varied for different types of tests. In a subset of states where GAO obtained the best comparative data, multiple-choice tests averaged less than half the cost of performance-based tests ($16 versus $33, respectively).

In budgetary terms, testing rarely accounted for more than 1 percent of school district budgets, averaging about one-half of 1 percent of state education agency budgets. For only three tests in the country did state costs average more than district costs.

The Future Cost and Extent of Testing

GAO estimates that a national test modeled on the common multiple-choice tests, if taken by 10 million students a year, would cost about $160 million; a national performance-based test similar to those now developed in several states would cost $330 million per year, or almost two thirds of the $516 million GAO estimates is now spent on systemwide testing. Start-up development costs could add another $100 million.

But GAO found new costs would vary depending on the plan. Looking at decisions made in school districts that in the past faced a choice between an old test and a new state-mandated test, GAO found that 82 percent dropped the old test when the state's largely duplicated it, but were much ore likely to use both if the tests differed in purpose or coverage. If the same pattern held true in response to a national test, a national multiple-choice test would cost the districts only $42 million more and 15 minutes per student in new costs, all from additional testing in 26 percent of U.S. school districts. The other 74 percent of districts would simply drop a current test, replacing it with the national test. Because many fewer districts use such tests now, a national performance-based test would add more new costs in money and time: $209 million and 30 minutes per student.

Testing Officials' Views on Present and Future Testing

Seventy-five percent of state testing officials and 43 percent of local testing officials considered the net benefits of their present testing programs to be positive, and most believed that these benefits would continue or even increase if more tests were added.

Majorities mentioned performance-based testing as a positive trend and confirmed a trend away from norm-referenced multiple-choice tests toward tests with a higher degree of curriculum alignment. Less than half the states had a curriculum that their districts were obliged to follow, however, while 10 states had unrequired curricula.

The survey revealed significant opposition to the concept of a national examination system. Forty percent of local respondents and 29 percent of state respondents saw no advantages to a national system, and they forecast some disadvantages, particularly a potential for misuse of test results. Thirty-two percent of local respondents and 53 percent of state respondents, however, specifically cited the potential for comparing test scores nationally as an advantage of a national testing system. When asked under what conditions they would decide to use a voluntary national test, they rated most important whether or not the test was of high technical quality, useful to their needs, and not costly to them.

Matters for Congressional Consideration

GAO believes that if a decision is made to implement a national examination system, the Congress may wish to ensure the involvement of local teachers and administrators in test development and scoring and of state testing officials in planning and implementation. This should build support and improve the likelihood of success as state and local educators will probably play a considerable role in the administration of any national test.

If the Congress wishes to encourage the development of a well-accepted and widely used national examination system, it should also consider means for ensuring the technical quality of the tests. Test quality will require an enduring commitment and sufficient resources.

Further Reading

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